



Old Order Amish Steering Committee

CHAIRMAN - *Voice of the Old Order Amish* - NATIONAL

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Kinzers, Pennsylvania 17335



October 6, 2003

House Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
B-346 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6100

Honorable Congressmen, Mr. Chairman and Committee members,

It is with appreciation, but humbleness, that we come before your committee. We wish to thank you for the opportunity to bring some of our concerns before you today.

I am speaking here today on the behalf of the many Old Order Amish and Mennonite communities through out the United States. In recent years we are getting more and more complaints of Amish & Mennonite businesses being fined for allowing boys under age 18 to work in their place of business. Our concern is the infringement of these Child Labor Laws on our way of life.

As many of you undoubtedly know, the Amish way of life and religious beliefs prohibit formal education beyond the eighth grade level. Typically, the Amish youth leave school at the end of eighth grade, but their education does not stop there. Instead, they only begin to absorb in earnest, the knowledge and skills needed to earn a livelihood and support a family. Upon completion of the eight terms of elementary school, many Amish children are enrolled in an informal vocation class of learning by doing under parent and church supervision to further prepare them to enter into the adult work place. This informal vocational class is recognized by the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, as a legal alternative to the compulsory school attendance laws.

At age 14, an Amish boy or girl is considered to be ready for a full course of training. A training that requires "learning by doing". This adolescent period is of utmost importance to our religious status. We must not tolerate idleness during these adolescent years, therefore, we see a dire need that our youth learn a trade or remain occupied, preferably under supervision of a parent or church member. It is a long-standing Amish belief and tradition to instill good work ethics in our children at a young age and to start training a child at a fairly young age to become a self-supporting, respectful and law abiding citizen. Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6). We strongly believe the ages 14 through 17 to be a very tender receptive age in which to instill these long standing Amish values and work ethics in our children. We believe that forced idleness in this age to be detrimental to our long-standing Amish way of raising our children and teaching them to become good productive citizens. Keeping young hands busy also keeps them out of mischief.

Child Labor testimony, con'd

We recognize that, historically, the Child Labor laws have been more lenient on farm labor, especially a family farm. For many years our livelihood was based largely on agriculture and for many still is. However due to many reasons beyond our control, the trend is gradually forcing more and more of our youth to learn other trades. We try to encourage an occupation where such youth is learning by doing by working at a place where his father or a member of the church is available to supervise him.

Due to the high cost of our dwindling supply of farm land, more and more of our families are being forced to start small businesses such as woodworking shops, welding shops, sawmills, pallet shops etc. This is in keeping with the Amish tradition of operating a family business so the family can work together.

We have many Amish owned or operated sawmills among our communities. Our youth are well qualified and capable of providing hand labor in stacking and sorting the lumber as it comes away from the saws. This sorting and stacking operation usually occurs some distance away from the saws themselves. However, under the present regulations no one under age 18 is allowed to work in a sawmill building. We have in the audience several owners of sawmill operations that were investigated and fined for allowing boys under age 18 to work in the very situation described above. None of the owners were aware that they were in violation of the child labor law until the investigator showed up. They were told to send the boys home and warned that if he (the investigator) comes back again in several weeks and finds the boys back on the premises, he will shut the whole operation down. These threats created a great concern in the area, not only among the Amish, but also among their non Amish neighbors. They received no warning before they were fined even though the owners indicated they would comply with the order.

One of the owners related an incident to me where one of the boys, whom he was required to send home, came back and asked, in tears, "When can I come to work again?" The owner of course had to say "Not until you are eighteen."

In our small woodworking shops there are many occupations our youth would be capable of performing, however, more and more of our small woodworking shops are finding themselves in violation with the child labor laws because of the power tools that are needed to be efficient. Under the present Regulations even the owners own boy could not work until age 16 in a manufacturing operation or age 18 in any occupation which the Secretary of Labor shall declare to be hazardous.

There seems to be a lot governmental interest in finding ways to better prepare todays youth to enter into todays workforce. Many states are drafting School to Work Acts. It seems coincidental that at the same time, these Amish are being fined for pursuing a system which has been proven successful in preparing our youth for adulthood and to be respectful, self-supporting citizens.

Child Labor testimony, con'd

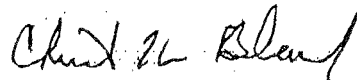
In Wisconsin v. Yoder, Dr. Donald Erickson testified that the Amish System of learning by doing was an "ideal system" of education in terms of preparing Amish children for life as adults in the Amish community. He further stated, "Many public educators would be elated if their programs would be as successful in preparing their students for productive community life as the Amish system seems to be."

We realize that the object of the Child Labor laws is to protect the children. We Amish share your concern for safety in the work place. As an illustration of our concern, in one of our larger communities they have set up an Amish safety committee. The purpose of this committee is to work with Amish businesses to help make our people more aware of good safety practices that need to be instilled in our work places. Some other Amish communities are also showing interest in setting similar committees.

As Old Order Amish, we desire to be a self supporting group, taking care of their own needy and elderly people, in their own way, without depending on the government for assistance. In the past we have been granted a number of exemptions from participating in various programs or requirements which our forefathers saw as being detrimental to our way of life or which our religious beliefs prohibit. We very much appreciate the many privileges which we have been granted over the years. It is our deepest desire to continue to be a self-supporting group and not to become a burden on society.

We ask and plea of you men of authority to find some reasonable solution to this current problem and concern that we bring before you today. We wish you many blessings and the guidance from above in performing your many very important duties as elected officials of our country. May the Lord Bless you.

Respectfully yours,



Christ K. Blank, Chairman
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